DRAFT

WHO DECIDES
WHAT STUDENTS LEARN IN SCHOOL
. . . AND HOW?

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Alberta Education

Curriculum Design Branch

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WHO DECIDES WHAT STUDENTS LEARN IN SCHOOL?

Albertans do. All Albertans play an important role in deciding what students learn from their first days in early childhood programs and elementary school right through grade 12....

- The Minister of Education
- Alberta Education staff
- Students
- Parents
- Teachers
- Principals
- Superintendents
- School Trustees
- Educational Associations
- Vocational Centres, Colleges, Universities
- Other Government Departments
- The Whole Community - - community members and agencies.

AND HOW ARE THE DECISIONS MADE?

That's what this booklet is all about. It answers the questions that people often ask us about the programs students take in school - - who puts the programs together, and how they do it.

WHY DO WE HAVE PROGRAMS OF STUDY?

We want to give all of our students the best possible education so that they can build a good future for themselves, their families, and Alberta. Through programs of study, we give students:

an excellent education

Programs of study outline the knowledge, the skills, and the positive attitudes students need to fulfill their personal goals and make lasting contributions to society.

a responsive education

Programs confirm the dignity and the worth of all students, and provide for learning experiences that match the abilities, needs, and interests of students at different ages and stages of growth.

an equitable education

Programs support the right of students to the same high standards of basic education regardless of their abilities, race, religion, sex, economic situation, or place of residence in this province.

a flexible education

Programs enable school boards, schools, teachers, and community members to decide how they can best meet the unique needs of their students - - how students will be taught, and the learning experiences that are best for each student.

an accountable education

Through programs of study, we fulfill our responsibility and our commitment to students and society. We ensure that students are well prepared for life in today's world and tomorrow's.

WHAT IS A PROGRAM OF STUDIES?

A program of studies is the legal document that specifies what students are expected to learn in a subject area, at each level of schooling - - elementary, junior, and senior high school. For example, the junior high program of studies for mathematics outlines the math courses for students in grades 7 to 9, and what students need to learn in each course. Here's what a program of studies contains:

a philosophy statement

- what the program or subject is all about; for example, what math is and what students do when they study math;

a rationale

- why students should take the program; how the program benefits students and helps them get ready for life beyond school;

student learning expectations

- the concepts, skills, and positive attitudes students are expected to develop as they progress through the program;

a required part and an elective part - in secondary school programs only

- the "required" part or the learning expectations for students, and an "elective" part that teachers may use to meet the individual needs of students - - to enrich students' learning or help students strengthen required concepts and skills;

A program of studies is vitally important because it states what students should learn so they can assume responsibility for themselves, and for the future direction of society. But that's not the whole story.

WHAT ELSE DOES A PROGRAM OF STUDIES DO?

A program of studies specifies what students should learn; but it also sets in motion many other activities necessary to ensure that students do learn. So, a program of studies is the starting point or the basis for developing:

learning resources for students

- the "basic" learning materials - - such as textbooks, audiovisual materials, and computer software - - that cover the program and are essential for helping students learn to the best of their abilities;

- the "support" materials that just address some of the topics or skills in a program, but would still be very helpful to students;

support resources for teachers

- manuals on new and revised programs, and other materials which help teachers to prepare the very best classes for students, and to select teaching methods that are well suited to the individual needs of their pupils;

programs in French and other languages

- the French language version of the program for students who are entitled to instruction in French under Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and versions in other languages (for example, Ukrainian).

distance education courses

- the correspondence or distance education courses which give students in small schools, and isolated areas of the province the same range of educational opportunities as students in larger schools.

student achievement tests and diploma examinations

- the provincial tests and diploma examinations that tell us: a) how well students have achieved the learning expectations specified in the program, and b) if any changes should be made to the program or the way it's being offered to students;

orientation materials for teachers

- materials that quickly take teachers through a new or revised program, and help teachers decide how to present the program to students;

methods for delivering the program to students

- the ways in which we can best introduce the program in schools; for example, the technology and the school-community partnerships that can help schools offer the program for students.

WHAT GOES INTO THE MAKING OF A PROGRAM OF STUDIES?

Whenever we design a program of studies, we focus on students and what students really need to learn, and we try to balance the needs and expectations of our young people with those of our society. Here are some of the things that we consider, and that guide our decisions and actions:

the goals of education

- the goals of basic education for Alberta,
- the goals of early childhood services,
- the goals of elementary education,
- the goals of secondary education,
- and the role of elementary, junior, and senior high schools.

desirable personal characteristics

- the positive attitudes and values that students should develop, and that are essential to the improvement of society.

the nature and needs of the learner

- the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that students should develop, and that help students learn to learn,
- the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs and abilities of students at different ages and stages of growth,
- the ways in which students learn best - - the different learning styles of students, their pace of learning, and their active involvement in learning,
- special needs of students - for example, the student's first language and culture,
- the continuity in what students are expected to learn from subject to subject, and from grade to grade.

the nature and needs of our changing society

- the needs, roles and responsibilities of all the people involved in the education of students,
- the pluralistic nature of our society, the strength of our linguistic, cultural, and spiritual differences, and our common goals for the future,
- the social, cultural, economic, technological, and political changes taking place in our society and other areas of the world,
- provincial, national, and global issues of the day and of tomorrow.

the nature of knowledge in each subject

- the major developments or discoveries in each field of study,
- the thinking skills that are the foundation of each field of study,
- the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge (subjects); for example, what social studies has in common with language arts and mathematics with science,
- the extent to which new theories or concepts in a field of study are accepted among the experts,
- the relevance of the subject to students' learning and development, and to students' futures.

the learning environment

- the major characteristics of the learning environment: the school, the community, the home,
- the needs and the role of the teacher or facilitator who guides the learning of students,
- the facilities, equipment, student learning and support materials required to offer the program successfully,
- the mode, or the ways in which the program can best be delivered to students - - the most effective use of new technologies, and the learning experiences that can be provided by community members and agencies.

provincial directions for education

- the School Act,
- ECS-Elementary Policy on Education Program Continuity,
- Secondary Education Policy,
- Language Education Policy,
- Native Education Policy,
- Controversial Issues Policy,
- Policy on Metrication.

WHEN DO WE DESIGN PROGRAMS OF STUDY?

We regularly review and revise all programs of study. We look around corners, toward the future, and we make sure that programs anticipate, keep pace with, and meet the changing needs of our students and society.

The life cycle of a program is usually 8 or 9 years. It takes at least 3 years to design and introduce an excellent program into schools for students. Schools offer the program for about 5 or 6 years. Then we begin to review and revise the program again. Of course, we don't assess and update all of the programs at the same time. Instead, we select several programs of study each year.

Some of the major reasons for revising or developing a new program follow:

an outdated program

We replace programs that have served students well, but are no longer viable in today's society. For example, instead of having a stand-alone "technology" course, we're now making the concepts, skills, and positive attitudes necessary for using new technology part of all programs.

new knowledge about student learning and development

We use what we learn from research and experience to reorganize curriculum (program) content so that it better matches the needs and abilities of students, and better reflects how students learn best.

the new needs of students and society

We design innovative programs that prepare students to live in an ever-changing society, to pursue new careers or careers that require new skills - - that help students to manage change, make the most of new opportunities, and shape the future through their actions.

new knowledge in a subject

We revise or update programs to keep students informed about the latest theories and concepts in a given field. That's a pretty big job, because current research shows that society's knowledge base is doubling every 5.5 years - - a "knowledge explosion".

the need for continuity and consistency among programs

We make sure that there are always "links" or continuity and consistency in what students learn from one subject to another, and one program to another.

major policy changes

Last, but not least, we ensure that our programs reflect the new policies, or directions for education, shaped by the views of Albertans and introduced by the provincial government; for example: the Secondary Education in Alberta: Policy Statement (1985).

We recognize that striving for excellence, that building on our good programs to make them even better, can sometimes be costly. However, we believe that it would be even more costly, both financially and socially, if we did not prepare our children to face, compete in, and lead our society with courage, insight, and resourcefulness.

HOW DO WE DEVELOP A PROGRAM OF STUDY?

We usually go through 7 stages in developing and introducing a new or revised program for our students:

- needs assessment - identifying needs and reviewing a program,
- initiation - creating a blueprint of the new or revised program,
- development - drafting the program,
- validation - testing the program,
- final approval - forwarding the program to the Minister for review and authorization,
- implementation - introducing the program in schools,
- maintenance and evaluation - assessing how well the program meets the needs of students - - which brings us right back to the first stage.

That sounds like a lot of work, and it is. Here's what the program development cycle looks like, and how it works.

STAGE 1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

At this stage, we identify the needs that should be addressed, primarily the needs of our students. Then we look at how well the selected program of studies, as well as the student learning resources, teacher support resources, and other materials based on the program really meet those needs. In other words, we pinpoint the information necessary for deciding whether we should:

- keep the program just as it is;
- discontinue the program;
- revise the program;
- develop a new program.

This decision is carefully made because any major change to a program of studies, rather than selected learning or teaching resources, will affect all the materials based on the program.

First, we put together a needs assessment plan that outlines:

- the reasons for a needs assessment;
- the major issues and questions to be addressed about the program of studies, student learning resources, teacher support resources, student evaluation, etc.;
- the methods to be used for collecting the necessary information;
- the Albertans to be involved in the needs assessment;
- the timelines and budget.

Then we conduct the needs assessment. We:

- identify the needs of students
  - the needs that should be met through the program and support materials we're reviewing, through other programs and support resources (possibly new ones), and through schooling as a whole.

- construct the questions to be answered
  - primarily, questions that tell us how well a program is meeting the needs of students, and how it could be improved; for example: "Are the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes specified in the program the most important ones for students to learn? Are there any gaps between what the program expects students to learn, and what students are actually learning and achieving? If so, why and how can we eliminate these gaps? Are student learning expectations specific, clear, and set out in a way that really helps teachers?"

- collect information for making decisions
  - through meetings, interviews and visits to schools,
  - through especially designed questionnaires or surveys,
  - by reviewing the current research on: student learning and development; the changes taking place in our society; and new knowledge in a field or subject of study,
  - by reviewing what's known about effective teaching methods, and approaches that help students learn to learn,
  - by looking at programs in other provinces and countries,
  - by reviewing student achievement tests and diploma examinations,
  - by examining information collected by Regional Offices of Education - - by the people who regularly visit and keep in touch with what's happening in our schools and classrooms.

- involve and rely on the advice of Albertans
  - students, teachers, principals, superintendents, school trustees, parents, educational associations, post-secondary institutions, private schools, other government departments, and many community members and agencies.

On completion of the needs assessment, we compile a brief report that outlines our findings, the recommendations received from Albertans, and the actions we need to take. If there's a need for a new or revised program, we go on to the next stage.

STAGE 2: INITIATION

We carefully develop an initial proposal for the new or revised program. That means we create a blueprint of the program, and a plan for all the work to be done.

The blueprint for the program outlines:

- why we need a new or revised program - - the reasons for revising or developing a program in terms of the needs to be met; primarily the needs of students,
- what the new program will look like - - the major changes to the program, or the main features of a new program,
- what will be required to support the program, student learning, and classroom instruction; for example: learning resources for students; support resources for teachers; distance education courses; programs in French and other languages; student achievement tests or diploma examinations; school facilities and resources such as technology; and school-community partnerships.
- how educational participants may be affected by the program; for example, the professional development needs of teachers,
- how the program will be validated or tested,
- how the program can best be introduced in schools,
- the criteria for evaluating and assessing the program,
- the timelines for developing and introducing the program in schools,
- background materials such as the recommendations of educational participants, and research that supports the changes or proposed directions for the program.

The plan for the program outlines:

- the major tasks to be accomplished,
- the Alberta Education staff responsible for each of the tasks,
- the timelines for the tasks, and
- budgets.

STAGE 3: DEVELOPMENT

The development stage comprises several activities:

- Drafting the program

  We now draft the program of studies - - the philosophy, rationale, and student learning expectations - - in keeping with the initial proposal or blueprint. Once a draft is ready, we generally hold meetings in each region of the province to gather the views and ideas of school staffs. A little later, we send the draft program to schools, to teachers and other interested Albertans for review. Then we revise the draft program of studies.

- Adapting the program

  We begin to design the distance education courses and to prepare the program in French and other languages.

- Preparing and selecting materials for students and teachers

  We also begin to select or prepare the basic learning resources for students and the support resources for teachers.

- Preparing student evaluation materials

  We start preparing student achievement tests or diploma examinations.

- Drafting orientation materials

  Finally, we draft some of the materials that will help schools to offer the new program for students. We may even hold some initial information sessions for teachers so that they can, in turn, familiarize colleagues in their own school jurisdictions with the new program.

STAGE 4: VALIDATION

Validation involves screening, field testing, making final revisions to the program of studies, and all of the support materials, as well as holding provincial orientation sesions for school staffs.

- Screening

  The program of studies and student learning resources are carefully screened to make sure that they:

  - clearly specify or address the concepts, skills, and positive attitudes students are expected to learn;
  - match the intellectual, physical, and emotional needs and abilities of students;
  - have a sound instructional design;
  - recognize and foster tolerance, understanding, and an appreciation for different peoples and their contributions to our society.

- Field Testing

  We field test the program of studies, the learning resources, and teacher support materials in different schools throughout the province. The length of field testing may vary from a few months to a whole school year, depending on whether the program is new, extensively revised, or simply updated. We also field test distance education courses, the French and other language versions of the program, and student evaluation materials.

- Making Final Revisions

  We carefully review the results from field testing, and make any necessary changes to the program of studies, learning resources, and teacher support documents.

  Once revisions to the program are completed, we finalize our work on the distance education courses, the versions of the program in French and other languages, and student evaluation materials.

- Orientation Sessions

  Finally, we hold orientation sessions throughout the province for teachers and administrators. During these sessions, we present and distribute materials that help schools and teachers plan and decide how to offer the new or revised program for students.

STAGE 5: FINAL APPROVAL

We forward the program of studies to the Minister for review and final approval.

The Minister authorizes the new program for use in Alberta's schools only when satisfied that the program fully meets the needs of students and society, reflects the views and expertise of Albertans, is of the highest possible quality, and can be offered in schools throughout the province without difficulty.

STAGE 6: IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation actually comprises:

- Communication

  We distribute the new program of studies, the teacher support resources, along with information on the student learning materials to all school jurisdictions before the program is to be introduced in schools.

- Orientation

  During this time, schools may continue to provide orientation sessions for teachers and to plan how they will offer the program for their students.

- Introduction of the Program

  The program of studies is offered in schools throughout the province.

STAGE 7: MAINTENANCE AND EVALUATION

While the program is being offered in schools, we continue to check how well the program meets the needs of students, and to address any concerns that Albertans may have.

After 5 or 6 years, we formally assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and acceptability of the program. This takes us right back to the needs assessment stage.

HOW DO ALBERTANS HELP TO DEVELOP A PROGRAM OF STUDIES?

We rely on Albertans to help us review, design, develop, test, and introduce programs of study in Alberta's schools. In fact, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for us to develop excellent programs without the advice and expertise of all the people who share a responsibility for educating students.

So, Albertans help us to make decisions about what students learn by:

- taking part in comprehensive reviews of programs like the secondary education review;
- giving us recommendations during the needs assessment or reviews of selected programs like health, ethics, and practical arts;
- participating on Program Coordinating Committees that are especially established to guide our work and make recommendations at each stage;
- participating on Subject Advisory Committees that help us develop the program, select the learning materials for students, and prepare support materials for teachers;
- attending regional meetings held by Alberta education staff;
- reviewing draft programs, and telling us what they think;
- coming to meetings, conferences or seminars along with Alberta Education staff and the Minister of Education;
- sending us briefs and letters, and even calling us to express their ideas and views.

A SPECIAL THANKS TO TEACHERS . . .

No discussion about programs of study would be complete without a special thank you to teachers. That's because programs of study reflect the expertise, the hard work, and the enthusiasm of Alberta's teachers.

Every year, teachers join Alberta Education to help us revise and design new programs for students. Teachers participate on the Program Coordinating Committees, and the Subject Advisory Committees that guide the development of programs and support resources from beginning to end. They volunteer to test the new program and resources in their classrooms. They give generously of their time to review draft documents and give us their recommendations. Finally, teachers put the new and revised programs into practice in every school.

Every day, teachers work hard to prepare lessons and to help every student learn and grow. They prepare and mark homework assignments and tests, and they even supervise recesses and provide all of the extra-curricular activities for children. Without the dedication of teachers, the goal of an excellent education could not be met.

So, we would like to take this opportunity to thank Alberta's teachers for their invaluable assistance and their tremendous contributions to the education of our students.

FOR MORE INFORMATION . . .

We welcome your views on programs for Alberta's students. If you have any questions, or would like more information, please call or write to:

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